

Determining Interest for a Subcontractor Career Fair

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Companies look to Cal Poly Construction Management as a great place to come and recruit for summer interns and new full time positions. But of the 141 companies that recruit at Cal Poly, only 16% of them are subcontractors. With so many general contractors, subcontractors often get passed over. This study looks at the interests from both students and industry to hold a separate recruiting event for subcontractors. It also investigates the best type of event to hold and other logistics.

Key Words: Subcontractors, Career Fair, Specialty Contracting

Introduction

The climate of the Cal Poly Construction Management department is very general contractor driven, with little focus on specialty trades or subcontractors. The majority of companies that come for meet and greets and career fairs are general contractors, leading to most students obtaining internships with a GC (General Contractor). While this is a great exposure to the construction world, a large part is being left out, subcontractors. Subcontractors do much of the work on any given project and most students don't get the opportunity for exposure to them. The large CM (Construction Management) career fair is filled with large general contractors leaving subcontractors to be passed over. Students need more exposure to subcontractors and the opportunity to interact with them.

As a member of Mechanical Contractors Association of America (MCAA) on campus I have been very fortunate to be introduced to the specialty side of contracting during my first quarter. However, I would have never gone out of my way to join it if it weren't for my mom that works for a mechanical contractor. My early exposure to mechanical contracting gave me extra interest in it and lead me to seek out a career in specialty contracting.

Most students don't get exposure to specialty contracting until they take specialties their 3rd or 4th year, and by then most of them know where they want to work. If students are introduced to the subcontracting side of things earlier, at the very least it will make them more rounded and introduce them to the other parts of the industry. This exposure will also show students that there are many other options out there in the world of construction. Subcontractors typically have the same pay and benefits of general contractors, so they provide a great career alternative along with great learning opportunities.

In talking with several of the contractors involved with MCAA, they have said their absence from info sessions and career fairs is because they do not get much of a benefit from them. At career fairs students are more drawn to the well-known general contractors and brush past the ones they don't recognize. Likewise, with info sessions, students don't recognize the company name so they don't attend. If there was special interest paid to specialty contracting companies, there might be more interaction between them and students, leading to more students working in specialties and more companies actively recruiting at Cal Poly.

There are a few suggestions on how to accomplish increasing the interaction between subcontractors and students, and they each have challenges and benefits. The first and easiest one to implement would be a special subcontractor only row at the large CM career fair. Another suggestion is to have a separate career fair only for subcontractors, separate and in addition to the large CM career fair. A final option would be to get students and subcontractors together at an off-campus mixer or meet and greet. To determine both student and industry interest, a survey was sent out to both students and subcontractors.

Survey Results

To determine the ways to get students and subcontractors interacting, a survey was sent out to student and subcontractors with similar questions. Subcontractors were selected from the master list of contractors that recruit or donate to the Construction Management program. Twenty-seven companies were selected, with 4 concrete, 1 demo, 4 drywall, 10 electrical and 10 mechanical. There was a total of 9 subcontractor responses and 48 student responses.

The subcontractors that responded varied in the type of specialty construction they work in. There were the most responses from electrical and mechanical subcontractors, and one from concrete and drywall. All contractors felt that their company would be interested in a subcontractor only career fair. All respondents would be looking for both part time and full time employees and would send somewhere between 1 and 6 representatives. A majority, 78%, felt that an off-campus mixer or meet and greet type of event would be better (Figure 1).

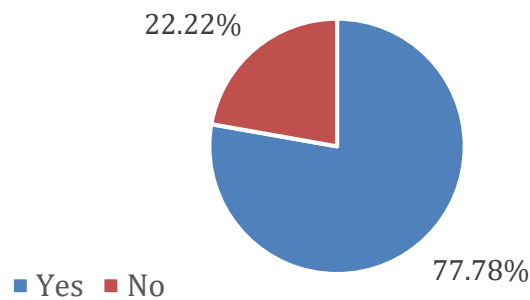


Figure 1: Subcontractor Interest in off-campus event

Of the students that responded, 70% said that they would be interested in a subcontractor only career fair, and a higher 77% felt that this type of event would benefit them. The most popular subcontractor students would like to see was a concrete subcontractor, followed by electrical, mechanical and demolition (Figure 2).

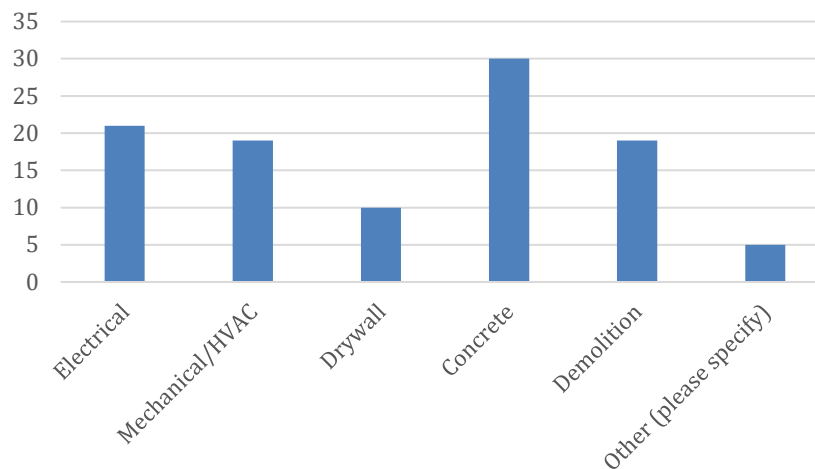


Figure 2: Student Subcontractor Interest

When the results of the two surveys are compared, both groups found Thursday and Friday to be the best day for them to attend a career fair event (Figure 3). Both groups agree that an off-campus mixer or meet and greet would be the best event. The groups are split on their views towards a subcontractor only row at the larger career fair, with 94% of students thinking it is best, but only 44% of subcontractors think that is a better option.

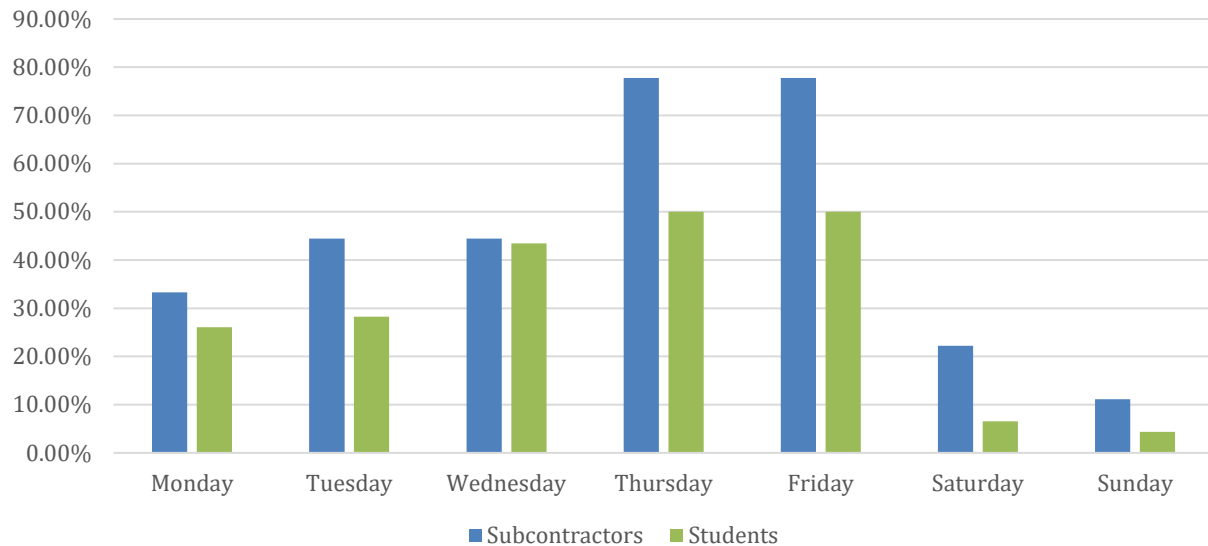


Figure 3: Best day for Career Fair

Separate Career Fair

Holding a separate and additional subcontractor only career fair could be a great way to get subcontractors and students to meet and network. There are some things that need to be organized before this can become a reality. The first thing that needs to happen is gaining subcontractor and student interest. Based on the surveys I have conducted, all subcontractors would be interested in this option, and about 70% of students would be interested. Once an interest is established, several logistics need to be worked out. A date and location, as well as contractors to invite and approval from the CM department and career services. If it is to be labeled an actual career fair, approval and planning will need to go through career services, which can be a long process. One way to get around career services is to call it a “Contractor Showcase” and have a club host and partially or fully fund it. Clubs on campus that specifically cater to subcontracting fields like MCAA (Mechanical Contractors Association of America) and NECA (National Electrical Contractors Association) can help fund and host the showcase. ASCM can also be involved if contractors other than MEP attend.

Choosing the contractors to attend should not be too difficult. There is a large number of subcontractors that contribute to or recruit at Cal Poly CM and it would be easy to draw a group of interested contractors from that list. Many students have a small idea of a sub work they could be interested in, so finding those companies and inviting them would benefit both students and those contractors. Based on the responses, most students are interested in concrete work, followed by electrical. Most general contractors have a concrete division, so establishing a difference between those GC’s that self-perform and contractors that only focus on concrete should be important.

As suggested by a subcontractor, students that have worked for subcontractors outside of this list should be included and welcomed. For a student, seeing that a fellow student worked for a subcontracting company and liked their experience, they would be more likely to check out that company. Students with past experience working for subs could be around to talk about it and give their feedback, possibly showing new students this different avenue of construction. If one of the specialty contracting clubs on campus hosted a panel of current and past students that have interned or gone on to work full time for a subcontractor, it could also help improve the allure of subcontractors.

The final thing to consider when arranging a career fair is the day and place. Hosting an on-campus career fair increases the number of students that will attend because they're already in the area. Depending on the size and number of companies that attend, it could be held in the CM courtyard in front of the Simpson Strong Tie building. If there is a large number of contractors interested, Chumash auditorium or the MAC in the Recreation Center can be rented out. As far as picking what day to hold it on, both students and contractors agree that Thursday or Friday work best. The career fair could be held on Thursday with interviews on Friday.

Subcontractor Only Row at the Career Fair

When subcontractors attend the larger CM career fair, they often use it not only for meeting student for internships and employment, but also for them to network with the general contractors they work with on a daily basis. Keeping with only one career fair and simply separating out the subcontractors from the GCs would keep the ability for contractor networking as well as giving them a separate area so they can receive special attention. With a separate row, it would make it easier for students to separate them from the GCs and give them a way to stand out from the GCs. Based on contractor and student responses, this is the most popular option for students (Figure 4), but not for subcontractors (Figure 5). Seeing that the ultimate goal of this is for subcontractors to get more exposure to students, following what the students think is best might be the best option.

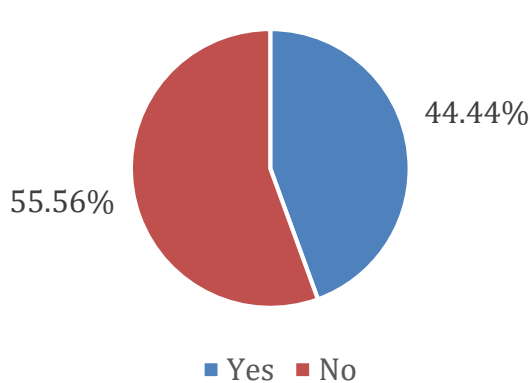


Figure 5: Subcontractor Interest in Sub only row at Career Fair

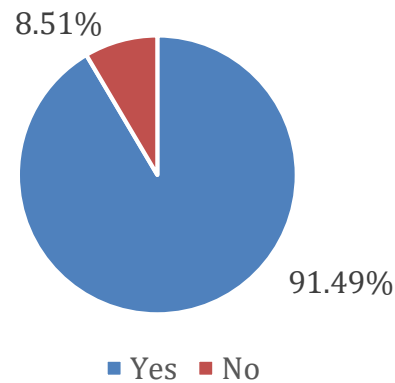


Figure 4: Student Interest in Sub only row at Career Fair

Off Campus Event

One final suggestion for subcontractors and students to meet would be for an off-campus mixer or meet and greet. This would offer a much more relaxed environment for both contractors and students, potentially helping the two groups interact more. However, this event could lead to some issues around alcohol, location and funding. If this event was to happen, it would have to be held at a location that allows students of all ages, not just 21+. Contractors and students alike enjoy events that serve alcohol, but it would need to be regulated so underage drinking does not occur and it is done responsibly. It would probably be easiest if it was an alcohol-free event, leaving it open for contractors and students to meet afterwards and enjoy adult beverages. Another issue to take on would be the funding of the off-campus event. The student clubs on campus could fund the food and rent out the location, but contractors could also be asked to help. The last thing to cover is location, somewhere off campus, but still easily accessible to students would be ideal. Renting out an event room in a downtown restaurant would be the best way to get both food and facilities.

When determining what type of event to hold to get subcontractors and students together, some things need to be taken into account. Most students have their summer jobs or full time contracts signed by the end of fall quarter. Therefore, it is best to have this kind of event during fall quarter, giving subcontractors a chance to hire students.

Working with engineering and construction management office advisors, a date could be set up that is different than the construction management, engineering and campus wide career fairs.

Conclusions and Future Research

With the research I conducted, it is clear that there is an interest in more interaction between subcontractors and students. However, more responses from subcontractors about types of events and days that work need to be received. With only 9 subcontractors responding, my conclusions are based on a very limited pool of information. If there was a plan put into motion to organize this type of event, I think there would be more subcontractor responses and interest. In regard to students, most stated that they would be interested in this type of event, so the only challenge would be to advertise and gather interest. Working with the information gathered, it is clear that a subcontractor only row at the large career fair and/or an off-campus event would be best for getting students to attend. Subcontractors would prefer their own career fair, but also like the idea of an off-campus event.

Subcontractors have a large role in the construction industry and more needs to be done at Cal Poly to help get students and subcontractors to interact. Subcontractors often get lost in the shuffle of large general contractors at career fairs, so with a separate event for them or even a separate row for them at the large career fair, they would get more attention. Based on responses from contractors and students, a separate row at the career fair or an off campus meet and greet would be the best way to further interaction. While there are some major items that need to be ironed out before an event like this could happen, the interest is there, as is the facilities to make it happen.